

House Bill 5593

Testimony – by Susan DeLeon, LMFT

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Section 34 – Penalizes Publication of Shelter Addresses without Written Consent of Domestic Violence Agency

History of Safe House – the Umbrella Center for Domestic Violence Services (formerly Domestic Violence Services of Greater New Haven) – now a BHcare program

In the spring of 2011, an established safe house that had been providing safety and anonymity for women and children fleeing from domestic violence for over 20 years was forced to close due to structural damages resulting from a leaky roof. After the ceiling fell in the children's room (no one was hurt), and it was decided that fixing the house would cost more than its value and that it should be closed. The intent was to purchase a house in another location that would serve to provide similar services to victims living throughout the Greater New Haven area that included the towns of Bethany, Orange, Milford, Woodbridge, New Haven, West Haven, East Haven, North Haven, Hamden, Branford, North Branford, Madison and Guilford.

Beginning that Spring, the Program Director worked with a real estate company and was able to identify several houses that were for sale and large enough with the number of rooms to accommodate 15 women and children (interchangeably) that included New Haven, West Haven, East Haven, Orange, and Hamden. Each time a house was identified, the Director contacted Planning and Zoning or if appropriate, the Mayor of that town to discuss the need and the parameters involved in pursuing the option of purchasing the house for the purpose of establishing a safe house in their town. The answer always had the same theme, I can't stop you, but you will have a problem with neighbors, you will have to go through planning and zoning and that will take years. The theme always being the same, "not in my town".

It was by sheer chance that a real estate company contacted the Director of UCDVS know there was a house in Milford, a kind of white elephant as she described it that would be a perfect fit for a safe house. It had been used in the past as a rooming house and was in a very remote and safe area. It was a location that no one would suspect had a safe house in its neighborhood; the area was very peaceful and quiet. At that point, the Director of the Domestic Violence program, the company's board member e(company attorney) and the CEO (at the time) held a meeting with town officials. As a matter of fact a survivor of domestic violence, a business owner from the town also attended the meeting. Others present included the Mayor of Milford (at the time) and a representative from planning and zoning. The purpose of the meeting was to inquire town officials would support the

purchase and subsequent renovations to transform what was an old boarding house to a safe house. It had been a first ray of hope when meeting attendees actually become excited as they committed to support our project. Both the Mayor and a representative from Planning and Zoning were willing to provide their full support for the project. The survivor who attended the meeting had tears in her eyes, as she was so happy and proud that a town she resided and had a thriving business would actually advocate on our behalf, stand up for our cause to provide safety and anonymity for women and children fleeing from violence. It was only after this meeting, that the agency's board of directors made the decision to move forward and purchase the house.

After the appropriate house inspections, and with some funds left over from the sale of the past shelter, minor renovations took place. As time progressed, a grant was successfully submitted to the Department of Social Services bonding commission granting the project \$190,000.

Staff were busy holding meetings with volunteers and looking for further financial support for the project. The town of Milford CDBG department was willing to provide funds to replace the roof and all of the windows along with any asbestos removal that needed to be done. It would seem that everyone was on board for the project and support was extremely encouraging.

In the summer of 2013, a neighbor contacted BHcare to state his dissatisfaction with the house becoming a shelter for abused women and children on his street. In an effort to mediate the process, the company's CEO and other relevant personnel met at town hall with the neighbor in an effort to put him at ease about the house being so in his neighborhood.

It would appear that through a series of news articles published, the address of the safe house was made public. It was very unfortunate and extremely daunting for the staff. A press conference was set for August 2013 to announce that that because the address was no longer confidential and had been announced in the news, the agency's board of directors made a decision to abandon the project. The decision was based on the fact that the increasingly public discussion about the property and its location could put any potential residents in danger – in effect, the constant discussion had created a danger that neighbors feared, where before there was none. So after almost 2 years of progress leading up to establishing a safe house where women and children could find respite, the project was gone. "Just like someone snapped their fingers"

Section 34 was created to address situations like the one described above. Allowing members of the public to purposely and knowingly disclose these addresses publically so that a shelter cannot be opened at that location is absolutely a problem that could eventually result in the exposure of all domestic violence shelters statewide. This would mean there would be no safe and confidential location for victims of domestic violence to reside.

During the event in Milford, the address of the shelter was shared on the internet via social media. Residents cited safety concerns and concerns that property values would be negatively impacted. The fact is that domestic violence shelters are established to blend in with surrounding homes. Yards and building facades are well-maintained so that they do not stick out. That is the goal of any shelter – to blend in and look exactly like your

neighbors. And safety is the first concern of any shelter program – extensive safety measures are in place at all of the state’s shelters.

When establishing a new location, the state’s domestic violence organizations will reach out to other homes in the area to work with them on any concerns they may have – and this had been done in the town of Milford. Domestic violence shelters in Connecticut continue to run at or above capacity. There is a real need for more shelter beds which may necessitate new shelters or the relocation of some to larger buildings. Under the privileged communications law, under no circumstances shall the location of a battered women’s center...be disclosed in any civil or criminal proceeding under the privileged communications law. Establishing some form of a penalty for purposeful disclosure of shelter locations will be a critical piece of dissuading future disclosures.

I am the Director of BHcare’s domestic violence program, the Umbrella Center for Domestic Violence Services and have been working on behalf of victims for the past 22 years. As an advocate that understands the trauma that is bestowed upon all those who are forced to flee from their homes, I have learned to appreciate that support from the community is what makes our programs work. I truly think it is everyone’s job to support those who work behind the scenes tirelessly to make our communities a safer place for all citizens. You know the old saying “it takes a village”. We can look at the situation described above as a onetime incident. But that would be thoughtless and uncaring on our part. I am hoping that our efforts to make a difference in the lives of adults and children effected by domestic violence does not go in vain or unnoticed. Approval of Section 34 would demonstrate to us that our legislators are behind us and that the violence we observe in our communities are not to be tolerated.